
WEST BERKSHIRE COUNCIL

PLANNING APPLICATIONS NO. 10/00503; 10/00493; 10/00490

**THE GROTTO, LOWER BASILDON, READING
DEMOLITION AND NEW EXTENSIONS TO EXISTING DWELLING HOUSE;
NEW EXTERNAL TERRACES AND TENNIS COURT;
NEW GARAGING AND NEW BOAT HOUSE**

Consultation response dated 23 February 2011

PRELIMINARY REPORT

Introduction

The proposals were reviewed and a site visit was undertaken in February 2011.

Submissions

Sterling Surveys
TVAS Ltd

825/X02
Building Recording February 2010

New plans are currently being drawn up.

Site Description

The site is within the North Wessex Downs AONB; opposite the Chilterns AONB and extends down to the River Thames. The Thames Path National Trail follows the northern bank of the river opposite the house.

The house sits on steeply rising ground at 50m AOD, 10m above the river and below land to the south-west rising to 65m AOD on the southern boundary of the site. The hills continue to rise to the south and west, with the flat plain of the river Thames extending northwards. The land between the house and studio and the river drops steeply, either as continuous slopes or as terraces with banks. A small valley runs between the main lawns and the old parking area near the river. A croquet lawn has been levelled out of the lawns resulting in an intrusive bank facing onto the river. This bank is topped by a yew hedge. The area to the north of the house is rundown and a mix of hard surfacing, trees and scrub and a few buildings. Further to the north is the Studio at the top of a slope and framed by trees. The site of the old boathouse is visible enclosed by overgrown Portuguese laurel. It is evident that the boathouse was sited away from the river façade of the house. A photograph of this boathouse shows that it was a modest pitched roof building. The area of former parking is in a poor state and enclosed in unmanaged woodland. A steep driveway descends down to this area.

The gardens are mainly laid out in lawns, with mature yews a dominant feature. Trees are scattered throughout the grounds. North and north-east of the house the grounds are wooded. There are a number of maturing Lawson cypress which are out of keeping and detract from the setting of the house.

The house has a narrow terrace fronting the river. This apron extends around the whole house widening to a driveway on the west side and to an informal parking area on the northside. The immediate surroundings to the house are of no particular landscape or garden design merit. The wider grounds are undermanaged but retain a simple parkland character, merging into the wooded landscape to the north.

Historic evidence shows that original grotto was built by Lady Fane, then owner of the Basildon Estate, in the first half of the 18th century. This was much admired. It was later incorporated into the house and the only part visible is a frieze in a wall, depicting putti and cherubs. Evidence from Pam Pheasant's book 'The Grotto House' shows that the house was framed by trees with gently sloping grounds and open lawns between the house and the river. Under the ownership of Gilbert Harter 1891 to 1938, the tennis court, croquet lawn, terracing, and other additions were made to the grounds. A boathouse is visible on the 1883 plan and later versions show it, up to the early 1970s. A 19th century avenue of trees, parallel with and alongside the river, survives as a line of mature trees on the site.

The historic mapping suggests that much of the basic layout of the driveway, paths, open area now used for parking, and open lawns have survived since at least 1840, although evidence of the current areas of tree planting does not appear to 1877.

The house is a prominent landmark on the east facing slopes of the North Wessex Downs, sitting on its raised terrace above the river but nestling at the foot of the wooded hills. It dwarfs other property in the area and has its own character in contrast with the smaller less prominent brick and claytiled sloping roofs of houses along the river corridor. Its white facades are a strong contrast to the surrounding landscape. Even the white painted Studio is quite visible in winter. The best views are from the Thames National Trail from the railway bridge to opposite the northern end of the estate. There are also views from the paths in the south of Goring and from several elevated hillsides within the Chilterns.

The site is sufficiently distant from both Goring and Streatley to have a strongly rural setting. Buildings along the river bank are modest in scale and character. The existing tree cover is important in screening the Studio and the existing parking and garage area.

North Wessex Downs Landscape Character Assessment 2002

The site lies within LCA2B: Ashampstead Downs. The objectives for this area are to conserve and enhance the quiet rural character and parkland.

Newbury District Landscape Character Assessment 1993

The site lies in LCT 4: Eastern chalklands – wooded. The guidelines suggest that appropriate management and replanting of parkland trees would maintain the enrichment of the landscape.

Key Landscape Issues

- Impact on the North Wessex Downs AONB
- Impact on the setting of the Chilterns AONB

- Impact on the setting of the listed building
- Impact on views from the Thames Path and the Chilterns
- Restoration of a parkland setting in keeping with the house

Relevant Policy

National:	PPS1; PPS5; PPS7
South East Plan:	C3
West Berkshire Local Plan	OVS.2; ENV.1;

Assessment of the Scheme

The proposals are currently under review. The main aspects to be considered in due course are:

- The increase in the scale of the house
- The changes to garden levels and land remodelling
- The terrace, revisions to the driveway, new vehicular access into the gardens/parkland
- The mass and design of the garage
- The mass, design and location of the boat house
- Tree removal

Initial comments

It is important that the redesign of the house, new garaging and boat house all respect the historic importance of the landscape setting to the listed building and do not detract from this. They must also conserve and enhance the special qualities and natural beauty of this part of both the North Wessex Downs and Chilterns AONBs. Similarly they should not result in an adverse impact on views from the Chilterns and the Thames National Trail. The house makes a very important contribution to a particularly attractive panoramic view of the NWD and the Goring Gap with The Hollies (NT) and Rottendown Hill rising behind and the river in the foreground. The nearby listed railway bridge forms a part of this stretch of the Thames floodplain with clear intervisibility between this and the estate.

Of principle concern are the emerging proposals for the boathouse which may be too high and poorly located so as to detract from the setting of the house, interrupting views of the river façade, and be out of keeping with the character of the river landscape. The garaging will be hidden by mature trees along the river and roadside, but its design and layout should again enhance and be in keeping with the character of the landscape setting to the house.

The house is an important prominent feature of the landscape and the new additions should not detract from the views. Some more recent elements such as the croquet pitch slopes, modern buildings, car parking, Lawson cypress, and poor paving detract from the site.

The principle of creating of a well designed terrace around the house is fine but the levels are a big challenge and the terrace must be well designed into the surrounding gardens. Steep banks and high retaining elements would be out of keeping. A series of descending paved and grassed terraces, worked into the surrounding gardens might work.

The Landscape Masterplan must seek to enhance the landscape setting to the house, conserve and enhance the AONBs and the river landscape, promote the parkland qualities of the grounds and remove existing incongruous elements such as the croquet lawn,. The final approved Landscape Masterplan would form the basis of detailed landscape proposals under conditions. An Outline Landscape Management Plan should set out the objectives for

managing the grounds to ensure long term protection of the landscape, visual, historic, arboricultural and ecological assets of the estate. This would form the basis of a detailed Landscape Management Plan under a condition.

Recommendation

Further information should be submitted at this stage in order to assess the landscape and visual effects of the proposed developments and ensure that the proposals conserve and enhance the historic value of the site and the special qualities and natural beauty of the two AONBs. This includes:

- Appointment of a landscape architect/garden historian to assess the garden history and identify surviving elements of the historic design and advise on the most appropriate design for the grounds in keeping with the historic value of the house and grounds
- Appointment of a landscape architect to prepare a landscape and visual assessment and landscape masterplan for the estate
- A detailed Tree survey of trees between the driveway and the river as plotted on the Site Survey sheet 1
- Identification of shrub groups within this same area
- Landscape Masterplan for the whole grounds to include proposals for the setting of the house, the gardens, and parkland; setting of the garage and boat house; land modelling with sections and contours (existing and proposed); tree and vegetation removal; layout of hard landscaping including walls, fencing, retaining elements; and proposed new planting
- Outline Landscape Management Plan

I suggest that Colin White, Planning Officer, Chilterns AONB is also consulted, as well as the North Wessex Downs AONB.